

Philemon: An Introduction | January 14, 2017

- The letter to Philemon raises two questions:
 - How is Jesus revealed or made know?
 - In light of Jesus, how is the world changed?

Doing things Jesus' way

- There are lots of assumptions about Christianity "should be done" and how, as followers of Jesus, we might change the world around us.
- But following Jesus – and perhaps this should be self-evident - means paying particular attention to him and how he does things.
- And, if we are to do that, we'll see that Jesus' work wasn't from the outside in but the inside out. Which means, as Jesus' people, we can't both be Christian and isolate ourselves from the world, or stand over against it – that's not what Jesus did.
- To follow Jesus means to get involved, to get in between, get intimate.
- Someone I was reading recently made note that:
 - "To be with Jesus is to be where human suffering and pain are found, and it is to be with other human beings who are invited to be with Jesus. And that, says the New Testament, is a gift as well as sometimes a struggle and an embarrassment." (Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, p10)
- This is exactly the kind of story we see being worked out in Paul's letter to Philemon.

What's the story?

- The writer: Paul the persecutor who becomes Paul the Jesus follower.
- Third journey and time in Ephesus.
- Influence in Colosse and on Epaphras.

- The recipient: Philemon and Apphia become Christians and benefit the church.
- Paul's imprisonment, Onesimus' conversion.
- Paul learns of the rift between Philemon and Onesimus.
- The story of the letter to Philemon.
 - 1.7 Thank you for the refreshing kindness.
 - 1.8 Asking out of love, willing not forced.
 - 1.11 Onesimus is now useful to us.
 - 1.16-17 Not a slave but a brother, welcome him as you would me.
 - 1.19 Send me the bill.

In light of Jesus, how do we change the world?

- Following Jesus and changing the world means we don't strive to be *great* or *powerful* as the world might define those terms. It means we don't stand apart from or over against the world, but within it, where we get involved and serve.
- This means that for many of us "changing the world" means to work subversively, often quietly, in loving service of others.
- That's exactly what Paul's work was like between Philemon and Onesimus. And that work had dramatic ramifications for the future. Paul's attitude and work set into motion great change in the world, where the evils of things like slavery were and continue to be chipped away at.
- "Some nations boast of their horses and chariots, but we boast in the name of the LORD our God." (Psalm 20)
- "What one calls interruptions are precisely one's real life – the life God is sending one day by day." (CS Lewis)

Discussion Questions

- Growing up, what did you imagine "changing the world" to look like?

- How does Jesus' way of changing the world and (sometimes) our culture's way of changing the world differ?
- How did the early Christians, like Paul and others, "change the world"?
What kinds of things did they do that brought change?
- How can we better pay attention to Jesus and how he did things in order to help change the world? What kind of Jesus-like, or cross-shaped things might we do today?